



Urban cryptography

Description

Iâ??ve been investigating city life through the lens of cryptography. Here are some of the claims I think I can make on behalf of an â??urban cryptography.â??

- The most obvious contribution is that cryptography (digital encryption) addresses and resolves challenges of securing data and information flows in the city. But thereâ??s more.
- Cities rely on and perpetuate sign systems (semiotics). As a branch of semiotics cryptography develops further the cityâ??s place in an economy of signs.
- People, objects and information hide in cities. By inspecting the city through the lens of cryptography, we understand better the hidden aspects of city life and form. In this case cryptography provides a pretext for talking about urban hiddenness.
- Cryptographic processes mirror and inform what happens in the design, management and use of city elements and spaces. For example, cryptography exploits and relies on the properties of profligate combinations. In his book *The Culture of Cities* Lewis Mumford, identified cities as places where â??the goods of civilization are multiplied and manifoldedâ?• (3). Cities are also places where combinations of elements, spaces, places, buildings, infrastructural elements are enumerated and tested.
- The challenge of cryptography in the city is less a problem of coding and hiding as decoding and exposing. *Accessibility* is the watchword of contemporary urbanism: laying bare and revealing rather than just hiding things away.

You may think cryptography an unlikely means of framing an understanding of the city, but itâ??s in good company. Urban researchers have identified many alternative framings, and metaphors of the city. Here are some that Iâ??ve encountered in the literature on cities â?? in random order.

Scholars help us understand the city through: utopia, night life, walking, skateboarding, graffiti, seasons, light, colour, the transhuman, wellbeing, disadvantage, division, contest, efficiency, prosperity, smartness, apocalypse, dreams, body, organism, entertainment, festivals, film, play, video games, contest, paranoia, vertigo, nature, language, semiotics, extra-terrestrials, invasion, war, climate, non-place.

To mix metaphors further (lens, framing, facet), each framing sheds light on different facets of the city and a city is surely multifaceted. Each also occludes aspects of the city. What does a conceptual framing of the city as *cryptographic* reveal and conceal?

Perhaps such a framing emphasises calculation and technological mediations. Data security is already highly privileged. It carries with it the urgency of war and necessity, attracting attention and resources from government and industry. Like other high profile framings it runs the risk that it casts many other varied aspects of urban experience into the shadows, though I think it's possible to bring new facets of the cryptographic city into the light.

Reference

- Mumford, Lewis. 2016. *The Culture of Cities*. New York, NY: Open Road Media

Note

- The feature image shows housing at Keppel Bay, Singapore by Studio Libeskind, photographed in 2013.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cities
2. encryption
3. metaphor
4. urbanism

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